

Journal of Feminist Scholarship

Volume 2
Issue 2 *Spring 2012*

Article 10

Spring 2012

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Recommended Citation

Price, Kimala. 2018. "Reflections on Intellectual Hybridity." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 2 (Spring): 54-68. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol2/iss2/10>

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VIEWPOINT

Reflections on Intellectual Hybridity

Kimala Price, San Diego State University

Abstract: Drawing from the growing literature on interdisciplinarity and my own experiences as an intellectual hybrid, I discuss the personal and institutional challenges inherent in crossing disciplinary boundaries in the academy. I argue that boundary crossing is a natural occurrence and that the issue of (inter)disciplinarity is a matter of degree and of determining who gets to define the boundaries. Defining boundaries is not merely an intellectual enterprise, but also a political act that delineates what is, or is not, legitimate scholarship. This issue is especially salient to women's and gender studies during times of economic distress and educational budget cuts.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, research, activism, pedagogy, the academy, women's studies

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For the past two decades, scholars across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences have been debating the merits of interdisciplinarity. Nearly 8,000 articles have been published on the topic, and there has been a concerted effort among universities, private foundations, and federal agencies, such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, to cultivate collaborative research and teaching across disciplinary boundaries (Jacobs and Frickel 2009; Metzger and Zare 1999; Paletz, Smith-Doerr, and Vardi 2010). Moreover, we have seen an increase in the number of interdisciplinary programs at universities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), more than 800 universities and colleges (out of 2,348) granted bachelor's degrees in area, ethnic, cultural, gender, and multi- or interdisciplinary studies. More than 300 institutions out of 1,777 and more than 150 out of 737 granted masters' and doctoral degrees, respectively, through these programs. Although some research studies have shown that many faculty say they value interdisciplinary knowledge, this support varies across disciplines. For example, scholars in area studies are the most likely to cite research outside of their discipline, whereas mechanical engineers and economists are the least likely to do so (Jacobs and Frickel 2009). Interdisciplinarity, however, has always been central to feminist intellectual inquiry.

Proponents argue that interdisciplinarity spurs intellectual creativity and leads to the emergence of new kinds of knowledge. Interdisciplinary collaboration requires the cooperation of experts who bring different concepts, methodologies, and epistemologies to these endeavors; accordingly, such intellectual cross-fertilization can lead to fresh insights and overcome disciplinary shortsightedness (Mills et al. 2011; Nissani 1997). Advances in nanotechnology, for instance, would not have been possible without the contributions from physics, chemistry, electrical engineering, and materials science (Jacobs and Frickel 2009). Postmodernism has successfully diffused from philosophy across the humanities, social sciences, and applied fields such as education. As Jacobs concedes, "The [postmodernist] writings of the humanists Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, along with prominent social scientists like Charles Tilly and Robert Putnam, come to mind. While each of those authors has been influential in a somewhat different set of disciplines, each has been the subject of articles in many fields in the social sciences and humanities" (2009).

Interdisciplinarity can potentially transform the academy, creating an environment where disciplinary boundaries matter less and individuals are not penalized for crossing them. Critics, on the other hand, argue that interdisciplinarity does not transcend disciplinary dominance and may, in fact, reinforce disciplinary boundaries (Jacobs and Frickel 2009; Wallerstein 1996). Peterson (2008), for instance, argues that relatively newer interdisciplinary studies, such as women's studies, ethnic studies, and communication, are often "ghettoized"; they are viewed with suspicion because they threaten existing practices and structures of more traditional disciplines and the university. There may also be the lingering perception that interdisciplinary studies faculty are "second-class scholars" who failed to measure up to the rigor and focus of disciplinary scholarship and thus have taken refuge in the hinterlands of academe (Benson 1982). During times of financial difficulties, interdisciplinary departments and programs are often among the first to be targeted for elimination as part of overall budget-cutting strategies—which signals that these programs are dispensable in the eyes of university administrations and public officials.

Critics also argue that interdisciplinarity as a concept is ill-defined; it is not clear what exactly constitutes interdisciplinarity. Sociologists Jacobs and Frickel define interdisciplinarity simply as "communication and collaboration across academic disciplines" (2009, 44). This definition begs various questions. What does interdisciplinary collaboration look like? Is interdisciplinarity constituted exclusively by collaborative research? Julie Thompson Klein, a specialist in interdisciplinary studies, argues that there are three different models for crossing disciplinary boundaries: 1) the casual borrowing of ideas and methodological tools from another discipline; 2) the creation of multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary departments, programs, centers, and fields of study in which a disciplinary center holds; and 3) the complete deconstruction of disciplinary boundaries (qtd. in Boxer 2000, 123-24). The first two models are already prevalent within academia. For many practitioners of interdisciplinarity, the third is the ideal model; however, many might question the feasibility of the total destruction of disciplinary boundaries, given current institutional structures. The third model might work for the development of individual interdisciplinary courses, but it is not clear how it translates to the overall transformation of the structure of colleges and universities. Perhaps it is most useful to envision interdisciplinarity as an enterprise that assumes multiple guises and occurs at multiple levels: collaborative projects that bring together researchers from different disciplines; the individual scholar who incorporates several disciplinary traditions in her or his research and/or pedagogy; university courses that are team-taught by professors from different departments; university departments and programs that are interdisciplinary in structure; and fields of study that are interdisciplinary in nature. Each guise and level has its own particular, albeit interrelated, set of challenges and rewards.

As a faculty member of an interdisciplinary department who was trained in a traditional social science discipline *and* women's studies, I often find myself reflecting on my own experiences with boundary crossing and really contemplating what it means to be "interdisciplinary" in terms of scholarship and pedagogy. What makes a field or program of study or courses interdisciplinary? How do we advise graduate students who are pursuing or want to pursue interdisciplinary work, especially in women's studies? What are the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinarity? Given my own experiences in graduate school, on the job market, in publishing, in advising graduate students, and in developing and teaching university courses, I have developed conflicting opinions about crossing disciplines. Boundary crossing can be exhilarating and illuminating, as it allows a scholar to expand her or his intellectual curiosity. At the same time, boundary crossing can also be frustrating and tiring, as one is constantly defending her or his intellectual standpoint.

Not only must faculty deal with overbearing inquiries about the relevance of their interdisciplinary scholarship and courses, but students who choose to major or minor in interdisciplinary fields are also

often obliged to defend their choices. They are constantly bombarded with questions from their parents, friends, and other involved parties who are concerned that said students will not be able to land decent-paying jobs after graduation. After all, what can one *do* with a degree in women's studies, ethnic studies, or a general liberal arts degree? *Who* will hire you for what *kind* of job? What kind of career could you possibly have? Employing a line of questioning that reifies a vocational-training model of higher education and the supremacy of traditional disciplinary boundaries, concerned parties ignore the possibility that these students are not only learning concepts and critical-thinking skills that are transferable to the workplace and life in general, but that they are also learning the skill of solving problems and dealing with situations from multiple angles. I must confess that there are times in which *I* question the viability of interdisciplinary degrees, especially doctoral degrees in women's studies. While individuals with doctorates in women's studies are prime candidates for faculty positions in women's studies departments, would they be considered good candidates for positions in other kinds of departments, including more traditional disciplinary departments, even if their research and teaching interests match a specific job position's requirements?

I have had to learn how to navigate several different sites of knowledge in my research and pedagogy. I have had to be highly motivated and persistent in pursuing interdisciplinarity in my coursework and research on my own; however, I was also fortunate to have mentors who provided the support, guidance, and advice I needed, especially during the times I was tempted to give up. I often contemplate how I can pass this knowledge, support, and advice on to students who are interested in pursuing interdisciplinary work, as they are potentially the next generation of scholars and teachers. I contemplate whether there are ways to institutionalize such knowledge.

Using my own experiences as a springboard for discussion, this essay offers my reflections on what it means to be interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary, not only in theory but also in practice. It is part personal narrative, part critical analysis. It is also partially informed by casual conversations that I have had with colleagues over the years. It is an attempt to make sense of my *particular* experiences within academia, while attempting to understand how these experiences are indicative of larger systemic, institutional processes at play.

This essay is not meant to be a treatise arguing for or against interdisciplinarity; that is already well covered in the literature on the subject. Instead, it begins with the premise that boundary crossing is a regular occurrence, as disciplines have always borrowed from each other at one time or another. After the rise of interdisciplinary studies, such as women's studies and ethnic studies in the 1960s and 1970s, some scholars have felt the need to defend or decry the legitimacy of disciplinary boundary crossing. Given that there are real professional consequences, especially in terms of employment and publishing, what does it mean for the individual scholar who dares to transgress against the boundaries? What are the sanctions for not fitting within a neat disciplinary category? Equally, what does it mean to be a self-contained discipline, as it can be argued that many interdisciplinary fields of study (e.g., women's studies, African American studies, and American studies) have become disciplines themselves? How does the field of women's or feminist studies fit into the mix? Ultimately, defining and defying disciplinary and interdisciplinary boundaries are inherently political acts, not just mere intellectual enterprises.

Intellectual hybridity is simultaneously liberating and challenging. Interdisciplinarity expands the limits of intellectual and scholarly creativity, as it has allowed the exploration of topics that defy disciplinary boundaries. There is no "right" way to do intellectual hybridity; it can take on various forms depending upon the needs and preferences of the practitioner, as well as the constraints with which he or she must

contend. Interdisciplinarity also poses many institutional and disciplinary challenges. There are the institutional challenges posed by bureaucratic structures of the university that make it difficult to create and maintain interdisciplinary programs or even to cross-list courses. There are the scholarly gatekeepers who actively and rigorously maintain disciplinary boundaries and who can make it difficult for the intellectual hybrid, often accused of being both too broad and too narrow in his or her intellectual scope, to find a home within academia.

Intellectual Hybridity?

I have chosen to use the term “intellectual hybridity,” instead of interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinarity, in the title of this essay. What’s the difference? Terminology has been a point of contention in the discourse on cross-disciplinarity; distinctions are made among all these terms. Interdisciplinarity literally means moving “between disciplines,” while multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity translate into engaging with “multiple disciplines” and working “across disciplines,” respectively. Multidisciplinary implies an “add and stir” approach, whereas interdisciplinarity implies mixing, or blending, of disciplines. Within a multidisciplinary approach, the disciplines are still very distinct and discrete. Multidisciplinary researchers work less interdependently; one is merely interested in seeing how different disciplines approach a particular issue. In a multidisciplinary project on a given subject, one might ask: “How would a biologist deal with this issue as opposed to a sociologist or an historian?” In an interdisciplinary approach, one is interested in culling information, knowledge, research, and scholarship that best provide insight to a particular issue; such approach is more integrative in nature. There still might be some distinction among the different disciplines represented, but there is also some blurring of the lines.

In conversations regarding cross-disciplinarity there are often implications that one approach is better than the other. I like the term “hybridity,” for it connotes a blending without the value judgments inherent in conversations about correct terminology. After all, there are degrees of boundary crossing beyond the divide between interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches. Any mode of boundary crossing is acceptable, in my opinion, as long as it is not superficial and remains true to the unfettered spirit of creative pursuit and scholarly discovery. Hybridity also connotes the inseparability of the disciplinary perspectives that inform one’s scholarship. The parts work so seamlessly together that it can take a great deal of work to pull the disciplines apart, to separate them into discrete entities, if at all possible.

My concept of hybridity is partially informed by Wallerstein’s call to eradicate the boundaries among the social sciences, in keeping with his belief that the concept of interdisciplinarity only reifies the traditional disciplines (2008, 1996). Although I do not think that total eradication of disciplinary boundaries is necessary, Wallerstein’s claim has reinforced my stance that scholarship, especially among the social sciences, should truly be problem or theory-driven, as opposed to driven by specific methodologies, epistemologies, and frameworks that are discipline-bound. One should start with a substantive or theoretical question and then determine from there what the appropriate scholarly tools are to explore that question.

One Scholar’s Journey

I have spent much of my academic career defining my intellectual home. I am a political scientist who specializes in reproductive and sexual health policy; I am also a professor in a women’s studies department. Additionally, I identify (as many women’s studies academics do) as an activist-scholar who is interested in translating theory into practice, as well as in having action inform theory. While my research focuses on

feminist activism, I also have been a direct participant in activist movements. Despite the increased interest in interdisciplinary (or is it multidisciplinary?) research and pedagogy in the academy, I have often been asked to explain, and even defend, my academic and intellectual identity, whether in casual conversation or at job interviews. Am I a political scientist who happens to be a women's studies professor? Am I a reproductive health policy researcher who happens to be a policy analyst? Is my primary identity construed through women's or feminist studies or through political science or policy studies? How does one reconcile activism with the academic enterprise, given that their goals seem to be at odds with each other?

The simple answer is that I am all of these things simultaneously, as it is not a simple task to separate different sites of intellectual curiosity into discrete components. My research and activist engagement has not necessarily been discipline-bound, even though I have always had an interest in politics. Instead, it has been driven by my interests in specific topics, particularly reproduction, sexuality, and social justice. My initial motivation for returning to academia for graduate training was to pursue my interest in women's health policy and politics, specifically reproductive health and rights, after spending a few years working for a number of women's advocacy organizations. The question then was: What would be the right discipline and degree to pursue this interest? I ultimately settled on pursuing a doctorate in political science and a minor graduate certificate in women's studies, but I also crossed disciplinary lines by taking courses in public health, public policy, and social work.

Each discipline had much to offer to further my intellectual goals. For instance, women's studies could provide the feminist theoretical and epistemological foundation that I wanted, whereas political science could provide social science methodological training as well as insight into the inner workings and structures of government and political institutions. Public health could provide substantive knowledge on health care provision and policy. Public policy could provide insight into policy analysis and implementation. I ended up fashioning a course of study that included all of these elements.

Crossing these disciplinary lines was not as easy as it sounds. Although I ended up at a university that embraced and encouraged interdisciplinarity among its faculty and students, only a few of the courses I took were truly interdisciplinary in nature; my training in interdisciplinarity essentially consisted of taking a variety of courses outside of my home department. Due to this cross-fertilization, or experimentation, I even faced a degree of resistance from some faculty and students in my home department, who suggested that I was probably not really *doing* political science but some bastardized imitation of it.

On the job market, I initially thought of my self-constructed interdisciplinarity as an advantage. After all, I could apply to positions in a range of disciplines, including political science, public policy, women's studies, and African American studies. Instead, it offered a different set of challenges. The usual questions that one gets asked in job interviews became a minefield I had to tread carefully: What kinds of courses will you develop and teach? What will your research agenda look like? What kinds of grants will you apply for? What journals do you plan to publish in?

Each discipline has different disciplinary expectations even when there is some overlap among the disciplines. The boundary crosser must not only be mindful of these different expectations, but has to be conversant enough in all sets of norms and literatures in order to be perceived as legitimate in each discipline.¹ This can be a daunting task in just *one* discipline, much more so in multiple disciplines. Sharing his observations on interdisciplinarity and scholarly publishing, Robin Derricourt argues that

the average scholarly book stretching beyond boundaries will, in my view and experience, suffer from going against the limitations of the bounded world of academia.... So the [author] with a book in two disciplines may find it secures a home in neither. Perhaps this is the curse of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, suspicious of the broad sweep and the over-ambitious ground-breaker. (1996, 80)

In other words, one must neatly fit into a disciplinary niche in order to be considered a “legitimate” scholar.

It can be challenging for the individual scholar to secure an academic appointment or to place articles in journals, especially those that are discipline-bound, as questions of intellectual “fit” are levied against her or his work. By deeming a particular interdisciplinary paper, project, or body of work insufficiently grounded in a particular traditional discipline, academic gatekeepers—including hiring committees, tenure and promotion committees, journal editors, and grant-making institutions—undermine the legitimacy of interdisciplinary research, whether they do so knowingly or not. It is not necessarily always clear what makes a particular project sufficiently grounded in a discipline. Does it mean that a certain percentage (at least 50 percent?) of the references should be from a specific discipline, for instance? Or regardless of the percentage of references, does the mere inclusion of references and theories from other disciplines signal the “unfitness” of a project? In any case, questions of “fitness” insinuate that such research does not significantly contribute to or advance a traditional discipline’s collective knowledge.² Unfortunately, some scholars have argued that interdisciplinary studies are not as theory-driven as the traditional disciplines and therefore not abstract enough to contribute to our broader understandings of the human condition (Jacobs and Frickel 2009). In the end, academic gatekeepers play a significant role in defining disciplinary boundaries and thus in determining which types of research are legitimate and which are not; “fitness” is one of the measures used to define such boundaries.

This has implications for career advancement for interdisciplinary scholars. Reporting the results of a research study on environmental studies programs, Pfirman et al. argue:

[M]any colleges and universities have committed themselves to fostering interdisciplinary scholarship. But the scholars who work at that junction are confronted with conventional departmental hiring, review, and tenure procedures that are not suited to interdisciplinary work and that can slow or block the progress of their careers.... [W]hile growing numbers of universities and colleges have adopted formal procedures for hiring, and sometimes for reviewing, interdisciplinary faculty members, few have a comprehensive approach to the entire pre-tenure experience. Often, as such scholars move toward tenure, their intellectual contributions to works with many authors are challenged. That creates a disjuncture: Lured into the collaborative research needed for progress in an interdisciplinary field, scholars are later held to the standards of specific disciplines. (2005, B15)

Some universities have developed strategies to deal with interdisciplinary scholars at various stages of their academic career: graduate training, hiring, evaluation, tenure and promotion. A number of institutions, such as the University of Wisconsin at Madison, have raised money to hire faculty in interdisciplinary clusters of up to five researchers, while others have developed faculty co-funding schemes in which institutes support half of the costs of new faculty proposed by a department (Sá 2008). The expectation is that interdisciplinary scholars will have a dedicated space to foster their collaboration, while still being connected to colleagues in the traditional disciplines. Despite these efforts, some interdisciplinary scholars still report that their research is undervalued (Sá 2008).

Defining and Blurring the Boundaries

It is generally understood that certain fields of study, such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, public policy, and public health, are interdisciplinary by nature. It is also generally understood that other fields of study, such as history, literature, sociology, anthropology, chemistry, and biology, are the “traditional,” “pure” disciplines. We often have discussions about disciplines as though they have always existed in the forms that we are familiar with in our contemporary context; we often ignore the historical development of our

current understandings of disciplinary fields. According to Wallerstein, there were literally hundreds of disciplines in the period between the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries and little distinction existed between philosophy and science (2008, 1996). However, “natural scientists” felt the need to make distinctions, specifically drawing the line between science, which they equated with certainty, and non-science, which they believed dealt with the imaginary. In the period between the 1880s and 1945, we start to see the emergence of the “social sciences,” as some scholars advocated using “hard science,” as opposed to literature, law, and philosophy, to study social phenomena. From this emerged six “pure” social science disciplines: history, economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology. These new disciplines were reflected in the names of university departments, professional or scholarly associations, and journal names, as they developed during the first half of the twentieth century. The concept of interdisciplinarity as we know it today emerged in the 1920s, spurred by the activities and publications of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) (Wallerstein 2008).

The concept of academic disciplines implies that there are discrete boundaries and rules for inclusion and exclusion that keep those boundaries in place, as disciplines have mechanisms at their disposal that reward and police their practitioners. Disciplines also have shared knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts as well as a core of influential literature (or a canon) that shapes the direction of the discipline. A field of study becomes a discipline when it becomes part of academic institutional structures. Schools, institutes, and departments—possibly with tenure lines—are established across universities, and professional associations are founded to provide a professional home. Because of the perks associated with institutionalization—operating budgets, tenure lines, approved courses—it has been in the best interest of women’s studies to establish it as a distinct discipline. Feminist historian Marilyn Boxer argues:

Disciplines provide important tools for learning. Disciplines also inspire collegiality, loyalty, and pride; and many if not most of us share, at least as associates and affiliated members, some of the benefits of belonging to the corporate bodies that provided our institutional homes as students and aspiring academicians. We sought admittance to the goods held and dispensed by the select, those entitled to identify as professors of the discipline. (2000, 123).

Women’s studies can be best described as an interdisciplinary discipline, given that it combines elements of both concepts (Boxer 2000; Buker 2003; Friedman 1998; Katz 2001). First, women’s studies scholarship and pedagogy draw from a range of traditional disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and, increasingly, the physical and biological sciences. Although women’s studies is interdisciplinary by design, over the last four decades it has developed into and functions as a discipline. For instance, women’s studies students are expected to master certain concepts, such as the social construction of gender and sexuality, intersectionality, transnational feminism, and privilege and oppression, even though the precise meanings of these terms are contested within the discipline. Women’s studies has a growing canon of literature with which most scholars and practitioners are familiar: Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler (feminist theory); Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Gloria Anzaldúa (intersectionality); Chandra Talpade Mohanty (transnational feminism); Catharine MacKinnon (feminist jurisprudence); and Jennifer Baumgartner, Amy Richards, and Rebecca Walker (“third-wave” feminism). While we can argue that there is not necessarily a common feminist methodology, women’s studies scholars do share the propensity to critique methodological approaches within the (non-feminist) mainstream of traditional disciplines.

The composition of individual women’s studies programs and departments most often reflects the multidisciplinary model of hybridity, as many of the core faculty in these programs have been trained in a traditional discipline. Additionally, many programs rely on affiliated faculty members who have tenure

lines in other departments. My current department is best described as an interdisciplinary unit comprised of scholars who hold degrees in traditional disciplines such as history, English, comparative literature, psychology, and anthropology. Although my department offers many courses that are interdisciplinary in nature, such as “Women’s Sexuality and the Body” or “Gender, Race, and Class,” we all teach courses in our areas of expertise, which often reflect our disciplinary leanings.

Some of us within my department have had formal graduate training in women’s studies; others have not. Among those of us with women’s studies graduate training, none actually hold a PhD in Women’s Studies or even a joint PhD in Women’s Studies and another discipline. This is the case for most of the more than 900 women’s studies departments and programs nationwide. There are only fifteen stand-alone PhD programs in Women’s Studies, notably at Rutgers, Emory, UCLA, University of Maryland at College Park, and Arizona State University (NWSA 2009). There are a few other institutions, such as the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Brandeis, and Penn State, that offer joint PhDs in Women’s Studies with other disciplines. Even though many women’s studies programs now seek job candidates who hold a PhD in Women’s Studies, there currently are not enough stand-alone doctoral programs to fill these positions.

Even within interdisciplinary departments and programs, disciplinary boundaries may be unconsciously maintained. Women’s studies professors often still also identify as scholars of “traditional” disciplines—historians, anthropologists, psychologists, or literary studies scholars—as a quick review of a sample of departmental and program websites can illustrate. While there are the well-known and respected interdisciplinary journals that many of us read and contribute to, such as *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*, there are also many specialized journals within the discipline—e.g., *Gender & Society* (sociology), *Sex Roles* (psychology), *Gender & Politics* (political science), *Hypatia* (philosophy), and *The Journal of Women’s History*. These specialized publications provide space for dialogue among similarly oriented and trained feminist scholars, who work within both women’s studies *and* their respective traditional disciplines. This signals the desire and need to have overarching conversations not only within the general space of women’s studies but also in the more specialized spaces within the discipline.

Although political science has established itself as a distinct, self-standing discipline over the last century, the field still has internal struggles about its academic and intellectual identity; it can be challenging to determine what distinguishes political science from the other social sciences. Political science has borrowed from and has been influenced by a range of disciplines, notably history, philosophy, sociology, economics, psychology, and anthropology. Most practicing political scientists agree that the study of political institutions, behavior, and phenomena is the unifying element of the discipline; the disagreements and debates are about the best epistemological and methodological approaches to studying these objects (Monroe 2005). When does political science cease to be political science? What distinguishes political science from sub-specializations in other fields, such as political sociology, political psychology, political economy, or political ethnography or anthropology? Do those distinctions really matter?

A growing contingent of political scientists is consciously building conceptual and methodological bridges between anthropology and political science. They believe that political ethnography can provide a fresh perspective on politics, for example on topics such as power and public opinion. Despite the fact that several canonical political science texts, such as *Home Style* by Richard Fenno (1978), which studies members of Congress in their home districts, are based on participant observation, ethnography is generally underappreciated in academic political science (Schatz 2009). Nevertheless, political ethnographers (or political anthropologists?) have provided interesting insights on a range of political phenomena. For example, Michael Schatzberg has studied the influence of popular culture, literature, and religion on

politics in the Congo. Katherine Cramer Walsh has taken a non-traditional (by political science standards) approach to studying public opinion by observing (and participating in a limited fashion in) conversations of the patrons of a neighborhood corner store, which deviates from the use of standardized large-scale surveys that is standard procedure among public-opinion researchers (Schatz 2009). The insights on the mechanisms at play in both of these projects would not be possible without the total immersion of the researchers in the respective communities of study.

Some other fields of study, such as public health and policy studies, are more elusive. Public health is an interdisciplinary, substantive field that draws from medical, anthropological, sociological, economic, historical, legal, political, communicational, and demographic perspectives. For example, women's health, particularly reproductive health, menopause, and differences in health status among women, require interdisciplinary inquiry. In the area of health status among women, research studies need "to address the complex interaction between women's genetic and biological dispositions, their environment, personal health behaviors, racial/ethnic/cultural attributes, access to health care, and many other aspects that may contribute to differences in health status or outcomes between different populations of women" (Pinn 2005, 1407). We have begun to see more collaborative interdisciplinary research on women's health, much of it supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (Pinn 2005). A notable example is the work of Gipson et al. (2011), an interdisciplinary team comprised of researchers representing the fields of public/community health, anthropology, and women's and gender studies. The team conducts research on abortion in international settings, in places as diverse as Poland, Zanzibar, Mexico City, the Philippines, and Bangladesh. Abortion, controversial and stigmatized in many parts of the world, is a topic that requires researchers who are knowledgeable and skilled in navigating the social, political, and cultural taboos, as well as the associated clinical aspects.

The field of public health has moved toward disciplinary status, as many universities have departments or entire schools of public health; it even has a professional association, the American Public Health Association, which publishes the peer-reviewed *American Journal of Public Health*. One can get a master's or doctoral degree in public health. With its focus on analysis and program evaluation, policy studies is an interdisciplinary field that can stand alone as a separate department or school, or be declared as a specialty or subfield in more traditional disciplines, such as political science, economics, and sociology. However, given their interdisciplinary natures, can we say that there are theoretical or methodological cores that hold these respective fields together? Is there a core canon in either field?

Boundary crossing also happens between the academic and non-academic worlds. Women's studies and ethnic studies have a long tradition of praxis, i.e., the combination of theory and practice, as the practitioners of these fields are concerned with eradicating social, economic, and political injustices, not just theorizing about social justice (Naples 2006). Many of us working in such fields constantly cross the boundaries between scholarship, activism, and policy advocacy, and consider our advocacy and non-academic work as a unique intellectual enterprise that informs the kinds of research questions we explore in our projects. Our activism also informs our pedagogy.³ We design courses that not only develop analytical and critical-thinking skills, but also challenge students to explore how scholarship and theorizing can have an impact on everyday practice and vice versa. Activism is at times looked upon with suspicion by some academics who believe that it can cloud one's objectivity; however, the concept of objectivity has been challenged by many, especially feminist scholars who argue that there is no such thing as pure objectivity. There are merely differing degrees of subjectivity, as we all come with our own set of values and biases. The goal of research and scholarship should not necessarily be the achievement of objectivity, but the ability to approach our subjects of inquiry with a sense of fairness and respect (Harding 1987).

Knowledge and disciplines evolve; disciplines borrow from other disciplines. Given the amount of “cross-fertilization” among them, can we truly say that there are any “pure” disciplines anymore? Boundary crossing is a given. It is simply a matter of degree, mode of implementation, and the willingness of a discipline’s practitioners (and university administrations) to acknowledge and accept that this happens. This acceptance includes removing, or at least lessening, the obstacles that impede boundary crossing.

Interdisciplinary Hybridity in the Classroom

Establishing permanent interdisciplinary or hybrid courses and programs at universities is another challenge. There are disputes over intellectual turf among departments and programs, especially over who has legitimate claims to specific course topics. There are also institutional structures that can impede the development of hybrid courses. For example, when I assumed my position at my current university, I was eager to develop a new course around my specialization in reproductive rights. Many students and my colleagues were eager to have such a class taught, as no comparable course had been offered at the university, at least not in recent memory.

The course was going to examine the history, cultural attitudes, economics, demography, and politics of reproduction and sexual health. We would not only survey the anatomical, demographic, and behavioral facts about reproductive and sexual health, but also explore societal and cultural attitudes through film and personal narrative, and legal and policy issues through the study of key court cases and Congressional legislation. After all, reproduction is not *merely* a biological process. We, as a society, have imposed so many social, cultural, and political meanings on this basic function of the human body that it has become a politically contested issue that is increasingly regulated by the state. It makes sense to study it from multiple perspectives.

I originally wanted to call my new course “The Politics of Reproduction”; however, I was warned by a senior colleague that the title might trigger a turf war with the political science department, whose faculty might see the course as an encroachment on their intellectual territory. Such concerns make one wonder whether women’s studies departments, or any other department or program, can have a claim on developing courses on politics and government and whether it is legitimate to conceptualize “politics” beyond the sphere of official governmental action. Would it have made a difference that I was trained in political science? I ultimately settled on the title “Reproductive Rights and Justice” in order to circumvent the discussion altogether. This episode, however, left me wondering whether the “pure” disciplines will ever take interdisciplinary fields seriously—and whether they will consider interdisciplinary scholars as viable job candidates and acceptable instructors of courses that might encroach upon their discipline’s intellectual territory.

It can be difficult getting courses cross-listed at universities, even with the agreement of the departments involved. It usually becomes a question of which department can lay claim to the student enrollment in a specific course, as signified by the number of Full-Time Equivalent Students (FTES). Student enrollments in courses determine a department’s future budget allotment. Departments are usually reluctant to share or even give up FTES to another department, especially in times when budget funds are tight.

FTES can be detrimental to boundary crossing in other ways. The introduction to women’s studies in our department is not a single course. In fact, we have two introductory courses: WMNST 101, Self, Identity & Society, which is social science-based, and WMNST 102, Women: Images and Ideas, which is humanities-based. Although we would prefer to have a single, interdisciplinary introductory women’s studies class, we have our present structure in place because of institutional constraints due to FTES. This arrangement

is a way to ensure that the department enrolls enough students in our courses, while keeping enrollment numbers in individual sections at manageable levels. The challenge has been to develop these courses so that they are distinct from one another, without much overlap. We created a special curriculum committee to develop guidelines for our introductory course instructors.

Interdisciplinary or hybrid courses can be taught in a variety of ways. There is the model of the lone instructor who draws materials from multiple disciplines, or even uses materials that are in themselves interdisciplinary. When designing any type of course, instructors must determine the learning goals for the students, including the key concepts students should have mastered by the end of the semester or quarter. Instructors must also decide which texts would be the most illuminating for students. When determining the assigned texts, however, the instructor of an interdisciplinary course is not bound by a specific discipline's literature. It is likely that the instructor is developing an interdisciplinary course in order to examine a specific topic or theme, usually one that is of intellectual and research interest to her. That said, the instructor is probably already well versed in multiple literatures; however, she may not feel as confident and competent in some areas as she does in others in terms of teaching. As a result, she may resort to bringing in guest speakers in certain weeks. For example, in my reproductive justice course, I brought in a licensed health educator to conduct the reproductive anatomy portion of the course.

Another model is the interdisciplinary course taught by a team that is comprised of faculty drawn from two or more disciplines or areas of specialization. While in graduate school, my first foray into teaching was a large (250 students) introductory course offered by the women's studies department. The team consisted of six graduate students and a faculty advisor. Although all members of the team were connected and trained in women's studies, we also came from a number of disciplinary approaches including literature, history, philosophy, American studies, political science, and public health. We developed the course together, choosing the topics to be covered and creating the syllabus and assignments. Each member of the team took the lead on at least two topics, usually within our individual disciplinary expertise; each topic had at least two to three leads who worked together. As the leads, we were not only responsible for suggesting the readings for our topic(s) but also for developing the lecture(s) on said topic(s). We all learned from each other, as this teaching structure allowed each of us to step away from our disciplinary comfort zones and learn how to teach different kinds of texts from different analytical standpoints. Given that we were also responsible for leading two weekly two-hour discussion sections, comprised of 25 students each, it helped having team members from other fields to turn to for advice on how to teach specific types of texts.

Although there was a shared sense among the members of the team of what were the "essential" women's studies or feminist readings, there were also tensions in terms of finding the right balance between the humanities and social sciences. We did not want one or two disciplines to dominate the course. Additionally, it was difficult to find an existing textbook that we could all agree upon, one that in our collective opinion successfully combined readings based in the humanities and in the social sciences. Many women's studies textbooks lean heavily in one direction; they are either mostly humanities-based or social science-based. Ultimately, we chose to design a course packet of readings that would serve as the main text of the course. Although the course packet cost a bit more than a standard textbook, due mainly to costly copyright permission fees, it served our goals of disciplinary balance and breadth of coverage of topics. We paired a novel (*A Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood), short stories, poetry, and personal narratives with readings that provided statistical and other empirical evidence within our weekly topics, so that students could gain multiple perspectives. We also included readings that defied disciplinary boundaries.

This tension related to the right balance between the humanities and the social sciences within women's

studies is a theme I would come to encounter many times since my graduate teaching experience; it is also felt in many interdisciplinary departments and programs beyond women's studies. Such tensions can manifest themselves not only in debates over how to teach specific courses but also in a department's overall curriculum, both undergraduate and graduate (Levin 2007). Many of the disagreements regarding the curriculum, especially graduate curriculum, can fall along disciplinary lines: What courses should be required for undergraduate majors and minors and graduate students? How should these required courses be taught? What readings and other materials should be included in the required courses?

Within my current department, we recently discussed whether to make the feminist methodology course a requirement for our master's graduate students and how the course should be structured. The discussion arose out of concerns that our graduate students did not have adequate training in designing research projects, which they needed for developing their theses. Many of our graduate students, especially those attempting social science-leaning research, were having a difficult time conceptualizing their thesis projects. We also noticed that students who took the methodology course were more likely to have a thesis proposal in place by the beginning of their second year in the program and more likely to finish their projects in a timely fashion.

The discussion fell along disciplinary lines, with faculty trained in the social sciences strongly advocating for the requirement. It generated many questions: Is there a core feminist methodology? If so, what does it look like? Methodology means different things within different disciplines. For many social scientists, methodology means the systemic collection and analysis of data, whether quantitative (numbers) or qualitative (textual), and is considered an integral part of research design. On the other hand, some of my humanities-trained colleagues have argued that they do not have an explicit methodology; they just do a close reading of a text. How do we reconcile these different approaches to methodology within an interdisciplinary discipline?

Some women's studies graduate programs that require feminist methodology, in fact, have two "methodology" courses: one that is focused on the humanities and another that is based in the social sciences. For example, the women's studies department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has separate methodology courses. This suggests that there are "tracks" within the interdisciplinary discipline of women's studies. My department ultimately decided to have a required methodology course that covers the range of disciplinary approaches to methodology. Although the course is run by one faculty member, other faculty contribute guest lectures in the areas of their methodological expertise, including, but not limited to, historical archival research, discourse analysis, ethnography/field observation, interviewing, and literary close reading. Although the course gives students a glimpse of the variety of methods available to them, it does not have the capacity to cover any of these methods in depth, a reflection of the compromises that are often made in interdisciplinary courses. Faculty still have to work closely with individual students on developing the methodology for their thesis projects, but at least now students will have a foundation from which to begin.

In the end, the structure of the methodology course is a lesson unto itself to graduate students. While they learn that they should not necessarily confine themselves to just one theoretical, methodological, epistemological, or analytical approach, they also witness the challenges of doing interdisciplinary work. It is not as easy to reconcile different disciplinary frameworks as it seems, as each discipline comes with its own set of norms, assumptions, and limitations. It takes time, practice, and patience to become a skilled interdisciplinary scholar and instructor who can manage and merge multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Some graduate students might elect to obtain degrees in interdisciplinary fields, or they may decide—or

be forced—to create an ad hoc program of study that reflects their interdisciplinary leanings as they pursue degrees in more traditional disciplines. Graduate programs should be flexible in allowing students to take courses in other programs and allowing at least some of these courses to count toward degree requirements in their home departments. As a graduate student, I did not just take courses outside of the political science department: I actually earned a graduate certificate in women’s studies, which required taking another 18 credit hours in addition to the hours I needed for the doctorate. I was fortunate to have a home department that allowed some of the credit hours from my women’s studies and public health courses to count toward my course requirements in political science. This, however, was after I made the case to my department’s advisor for graduate studies for how these courses were important to my intellectual development and deepened my understanding of health policy and politics; it also helped that the department did not offer courses in health policy. There should be more cooperation among individual programs and departments, so that students can venture into interdisciplinary waters. Recent research supports this sentiment. Newswander and Borrego assert that “an engaged faculty and student body are important factors in quality interdisciplinary graduate education. Furthermore, engagement can also be a reflective indicator of how well a program is meeting the unique needs of the interdisciplinary student” (2008, 560).

Concluding Thoughts

We need to recognize that disciplines are not static; they are always changing. Cross-fertilization is the norm, as disciplines have always borrowed from other disciplines, in a process that has enriched and broadened the creative scope of individual fields of study. It is a matter of us all accepting this reality and making the necessary accommodations that allow interdisciplinarity to flourish. Additionally, it is important to continue the dialogue about intellectual hybridity within women’s and feminist studies, especially during times of economic distress. (Inter)disciplinarity has a direct impact on the survival of our departments and programs within the academy and it influences the ways in which we function internally as an interdisciplinary discipline.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it represents my attempt to make sense of my particular experience; it is my meaning-making process. Even within a women’s studies department, I still feel the tensions among disciplinary boundaries, which tells me that interdisciplinary programs are not immune to these tensions. Based on my casual conversations with colleagues, I am not alone in my experience. Despite the number of articles written about interdisciplinarity, there is a surprising dearth of studies that systematically document and examine the experiences of scholars who deliberately cross disciplinary boundaries, particularly studies based on personal interviews. How do interdisciplinary scholars make sense of their experiences and institutional processes? What are their stories? How do they find meaning in all of this? Perhaps I have just unwittingly created a new thread of inquiry for my research agenda.

Notes

1. Some readers may object to my use of the term “illegitimate” here and in other parts of this paper, as opposed to other, less inflammatory terms such as “non-normative” or even “marginalized.” My use of the term is deliberate. It is not a value judgment on the “objective” scholarly soundness or rigor of a body of knowledge; instead, it reflects the subjective perceptions of others judging such bodies of knowledge from the outside. The use of the term is meant to evoke a degree of alienation and value judgment that the other terms simply cannot capture.

2. Dvora Yanow's enlightening chapter in Schatz (2009) advises editors of political science journals on how to fairly and responsibly evaluate submissions that employ political ethnography and instructs writers in how to represent their ethnographic research effectively to editors and readers. This article has implications for editors in general on how to review interdisciplinary research.

3. Much has been written on this subject, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into it more deeply. The following volumes provide in-depth discussions of the topic: *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action*, edited by Maralee Mayberry and Ellen Cronan Rose (Routledge, 1999); *Teaching Feminist Activism: Strategies from the Field*, edited by Nancy A. Naples and Karen Bojar (Routledge, 2002); and *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change*, edited by Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey (Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

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